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Reading Derrida in Tehran: Between an Open Door and an Empty *Sofreh*

Elisabeth Yarbakhsh

Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies (The Middle East and Central Asia), Australian National University, Canberra 0200, Australia; elisabeth.yarbakhsh@anu.edu.au

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Abstract: We can only begin to grasp hospitality as we enact it and yet, in the moment of enactment, hospitality eludes us. In this paper I look at the enactment of hospitality in the relationship between Iranian citizen-hosts and Afghan refugee-guests in the Islamic Republic of Iran, in order to reflect more broadly on questions of Derridean hospitality. Moving between the theoretical and the ethnographic, I forcefully bring to bear on a situation of protracted refugee displacement, a notion of hospitality that has, to a large extent, remained abstract and unanchored. The scalar shifts between the domestic and the national (so integral to Derrida's theorising of the hospitable), are here reproduced in an examination of Iranian hospitality that simultaneously considers the juridical framework of asylum in the Islamic Republic and the domestic or homely expression of welcome, that occurs in the ushering of the guest over the threshold and the sharing of food around the *sofreh*.

Keywords: Derrida; hospitality; Iran; Afghan refugees

Displacement can be thought of as a defining characteristic of the era in which we live. Against the backdrop of ongoing conflict both within and between states, the persistence of global inequalities and the varied impacts of climate change, refugees and the (otherwise) stateless will almost certainly continue to form, as Hannah Arendt perceptively noted in the mid-twentieth century, "the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics" (Arendt [1951] 1973, p. 277). It is little wonder then, that hospitality—that accretion of practices at the site of interaction between host and guest, emplaced and displaced, citizen and refugee—has emerged as a key theme in the social sciences. Indeed, recent years have seen, "a veritable explosion of interest in the subject [of hospitality] across the social sciences and humanities" (Candea and da Col 2012, p. S3).

What *is* hospitality? The question seems simple enough, but this simplicity is deceptive. Indeed, the precise constitutive parts of hospitality have proven difficult to pin down. Hospitality is understood primarily in terms of its practice. As such, definitions of Iranian hospitality founder on certain key symbols such as the *sofreh* (tablecloth) and the open door. Iranians routinely describe hospitality (*mehman navazi*) as a national virtue, an inherent trait of Iranian-ness and an abiding expression of identity. It is understood to be tied up in practices of conspicuous self-abasement and exaggerated courtesy, in accordance with the linguistic-cultural code of *ta'arof*. Afghan refugees in Iran identify hospitality primarily by its absence. "All I want is to stop being a refugee, to one day find a place I can call home", a young Afghan woman tells me, lamenting the elusiveness of Iranian hospitality.¹

¹ This and subsequent quotes from both Iranian and Afghan research participants was recorded during fieldwork undertaken by the author in the Islamic Republic of Iran between February and October 2014. The particular quote attributed here to a "young Afghan woman" formed part of a series of interviews conducted between May and October 2014 with an Afghan family of two generations living on the outskirts of Shiraz, in the south of Iran. While the first generation had migrated to Iran in 1985, the second generation, including the woman quoted, was born and raised in Iran—an experience that had significantly shaped perspectives on displacement and belonging. The quote is taken from an interview in September 2014 and was translated from the Persian by the author.

An Iranian-trained Afghan cleric describes the tensions between hospitality and inhospitality in the Islamic Republic as “an open door, but an empty *sofreh*”.² Jacques Derrida, in a 1997 lecture at Bosphorus University, declared that, “we do not know what hospitality is” (Derrida 2000a, p. 6). The implication is that hospitality is unknowable, “not because the idea is built around a difficult conceptual riddle, but because, in the end, hospitality is not a matter of objective knowledge, but belongs to another order altogether, beyond knowledge, an enigmatic ‘experience’ in which I set out for the stranger, for the other, for the unknown, where I cannot go” (Derrida 1997, p. 112).

Through this paper I seek to juxtapose two hospitalities: Iranian and Derridean. In doing so, I pose broader questions that speak to the interplay of ethnography and philosophy, asking how we might go about *reading Derrida in Tehran*. What meaning does Derrida have when I open a well-thumbed volume of *Of Hospitality* or *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* in a small room, in a house in which I am a guest, in a strange city?³ Does meaning shift and take on new form in talking with Afghan refugees, who claim a right to hospitality, drawing not on Derrida but on Khomeini? What contribution can Derrida make to conversations with Iranians for whom hospitality is identified as a kind of national character trait, even as the presence of Afghan refugees is unashamedly derided? What does the language of hospitality reveal and conceal in the often fraught relationship between Iranians and Afghans?

1. From Kant to Derrida

In order to understand Derridean hospitality we must turn to its origins in Kantian cosmopolitanism. In his short essay, *To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, first published in 1795, Immanuel Kant outlines his thinking around a cosmopolitan right to hospitality. Here, it is the notion of hospitality as “right” that effectively distinguishes it from charity or philanthropy and, indeed, marks out Kant’s thinking as remarkable in its time and having ongoing philosophical resonance. As construed by Kant, hospitality is universal in scope on account of “common ownership of the earth’s surface”. At the same time, Kantian hospitality is limited to the “right to visit”. A visitor, Kant argues, should not be treated as an enemy or as a threat to sovereignty. However, he may be turned away, so long as “it can be done without destroying him”. Significantly, the right to visit imposes conditions in regards to the length of visitation. Kant views hospitality as time-limited, arguing that any claim to permanency must necessarily be secured through an additional contract between the visitor and the local inhabitants. As such there is no right to residence but only a right to visitation (Kant [1795] 2003, pp. 15–16).

The distinction that Kant makes between *gastrecht* (right to residence) and *besuchsrecht* (right to visitation), lies at the heart of Derrida’s critique of Kantian cosmopolitanism and provides the launching point for a new way of thinking (and *doing*) hospitality. Derrida argues that the limits placed on Kantian hospitality and the contractual conditions that circumscribe permanent residency illuminate the aporetic nature of hospitality.

“Hospitality”, he declares, “is a self-contradictory concept and experience that can only self-destruct” (Derrida 2000a, p. 5). This self-destructive element to hospitality—what can be thought of as its essential instability—is, Derrida argues, present right there in Kant’s notion of cosmopolitan right and forms part of the enduring legacy of hospitality with which we must inevitably contend.

The internal contradiction that Derrida identifies in Kant’s theory of cosmopolitan right, arises out of the elevation of the state in the hospitality nexus. A right of residence is dependent on the establishment of a treaty between states “in which exclusionary and xenophobic restrictions are

² Mullah Azami was born in 1976 in Afghanistan’s Ghazni province and at nineteen moved to Iran to study in the seminary city of Qom. The interview with Mullah Azami from which this quote is taken, took place in May 2014 in the family home of another Afghan research participant who was living in the city of Sadra, and with the participation and assistance of an interpreter.

³ Derrida, Jacques. 2000. *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*. Edited by Anne Dufourmantelle. Translated by Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press; Derrida, Jacques. 1999. *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

indoctrinated" (Brown 2010, p. 311). The granting and withholding of residency places enormous power in the hands of the sovereign, such that hospitality becomes the exclusive domain of the state. Here we see a tension between what Derrida calls the *law* of (unconditional) hospitality—a "law beyond laws"—and the *laws* of hospitality, which are inscribed in the relationship between states and act to place limits and conditions on hospitality. In addressing this tension Derrida is particularly concerned with the implications of Kantian hospitality on the contemporary regime of asylum that circumscribes the lives of refugees globally (Derrida 2001).

Derrida points, in the first place, to a disjuncture between the "great and generous principles of the right to asylum inherited from the Enlightenment thinkers . . . and the historical reality or effective implementation of these principles" (Derrida 2001, p. 11). The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (and its 1967 Protocol) enshrines the principle of non-refoulement, stating that an asylum seeker may not be expelled or returned to "the frontiers of territories where his [or her] life or freedom would be threatened on account of his [or her] race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (UNHCR [1951] 2010, p. 30). Indeed, it is this threat to life or freedom as a propelling force in displacement that becomes the defining characteristic of a refugee under international law. We can recognise here echoes of Kant's prohibition on turning the visitor away, where to do so would result in his or her destruction. However, Derrida argues that the juridical tradition has "remained mean-spirited and restrictive", pointing to a failure of states to *practice* hospitality (Derrida 2001, p. 11).

At a more fundamental level, Kantian hospitality fails refugees, on account of its very impossibility. Hospitality is negated by hospitality. "Injustice", Derrida argues, "begins right away, from the very threshold of the right to hospitality", for there is "no hospitality, in the classic sense, without sovereignty of oneself over one's home, but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence" (Derrida 2000b, p. 55). It is here that Derrida invokes the notion of *hostipitalité* [hostipitality] in order to illuminate the performative contradiction of hospitality; the way in which hostility is intimately and invariably entangled with hospitality.

Rather than abandoning hospitality at the point of acknowledging its impossibility, Derrida calls for a "hospitality . . . beyond hospitality" (Derrida 2000a, p. 14). That is to say, a hospitality that pushes against its own limits, recognising that the "law of absolute hospitality commands a break with hospitality by right" (Derrida 2000b, p. 25). In a world that increasingly throws up borders against refugees (and the moving-poor), demanding ever more complex forms of identification and documentation, Derrida calls for a radical hospitality that asks no questions. Derridean hospitality is a "pure hospitality [that] consists in welcoming whoever arrives before imposing any conditions on him, before knowing and asking anything at all, be it a name or an identity 'paper'" (Derrida 2005, p. 7).

Derrida arrives at this notion of "pure hospitality" via an (often hostile) examination of Maussian gift theory (Derrida 1992). For Mauss, the gift circulates within an escalating system of reciprocity. In other words, the gift, as espoused by Mauss, is a counterfeit gift, just as Kantian hospitality (and the practiced hospitality that follows) is a counterfeit hospitality. Derridean philosophy, by way of contrast, points to an absolute, universal and utopian hospitality. At the same time, however, Derrida calls for giving "*place* to a determined, limitable, and delimitable—in a word, to a calculable—right or law . . . to a concrete politics and ethics" of hospitality (Derrida 2000b, pp. 147–48). As Ulrik Pram Gad (2013, p. 122) argues, there is a role for philosophy in keeping the "pillars supporting the ceiling" of political debate "erect and tall", but we also need to "make ourselves familiar with the strategic terrain we intend to intervene in". That is, "having shown that we can be philosophers, we need the courage to refuse this ambition and return to ethnographic empathy and ordinary language" (Miller 2005, p. 15).

The strategic terrain in which I utilise Derrida's notion of hospitality is the Islamic Republic of Iran, a nation that, over a period of almost four decades, has "hosted" millions of "guests" in the form of refugees from the neighbouring state of Afghanistan. Between February and October 2014, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, familiarising myself with the terrain of hospitality that shapes

and is shaped by the relationship between Iranian citizens and Afghan refugees. At this point, I shift the focus of my attention from the philosophical to the anthropological, drawing on my fieldwork in order to explore how hospitality is experienced by Iranian hosts and Afghan guests. Through the ethnographic accounts described below, threads the vital question of whether Derrida's *hospitality* formulation can be usefully applied to contemporary Iran and how, in turn, the Iranian experience might open up to us new ways of thinking hospitality.

2. Afghan Refugees in Iran

Afghans today constitute over 20 per cent of the global refugee population and 40 per cent of those in what UNHCR designates a situation of "protracted displacement" (UNHCR 2015). The vast majority of Afghan refugees (well over 90 per cent) reside in just two countries—Pakistan and Iran (Saito 2009, p. xi). For hundreds of years, Afghans belonging to the Shia sect of Islam have made pilgrimages to holy sites within Iran, most notably the tomb of the Imam Reza at Mashhad (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2005, p. 13). Moreover, at times of political crisis Iran has provided a safe-haven for Persian-speaking minorities from the central and western provinces of Afghanistan (Glazebrook and Abbasi-Shavazi 2007, p. 189). In the early-1970s, crop failure as a result of a severe drought, along with rising government taxes, compelled many Afghans to seek opportunities abroad (Saito 2009, p. 3). Most were not obliged to look far. The 1973 oil boom in the Middle East was accompanied by unprecedented growth in Iran's construction industry; providing the lure of relatively well remunerated employment to several hundred thousand Afghans who migrated westward into Iran. By December 1979, the economic incentive, somewhat muted by the revolutionary events that led to the departure of the Iranian Shah in January of that year and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic, was subsumed by an imperative to escape the Soviet invasion and unfolding war in Afghanistan. In the decades that followed, approximately one in three Afghans would seek safety—and a modicum of stability—outside their homeland (Colville 1997; Turton and Marsden 2002, pp. 9–10). Almost half of those who left would cross Afghanistan's western border into Iran, establishing a highly dispersed community, with populations of Afghan migrants found in most large regional centres and, in smaller numbers, throughout rural communities across Iran (Monsutti 2006, p. 12).

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan marked the first major sustained movement of Afghan refugees into Iran and resulted in the emergence of a global Afghan diaspora. At the time, the newly established revolutionary government in Iran had political and ideological motives in warmly embracing the Afghan exiles. Indeed, the early response of the Iranian government has frequently been characterised as "open door" (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2005, p. iii).

Iran's open door policy appears, at first glance, to draw less on global notions of asylum, than on ideas around shared religiosity and the revolutionary ideal of a borderless Islam. However, failing to acknowledge the various ways in which Iran was—and remains—embedded within a broader regime of asylum, is to risk perpetuating certain Orientalist myths about the Middle East in regards to the reach of Islam in public life. Iran, having ratified the UN Convention in June 1976 and reaffirmed its commitment to asylum in the 1979 Constitution of the Islamic Republic, is party to the same instruments that shape asylum at a global scale. What happened in the early post-revolutionary period was not an outright rejection of international laws and norms, but a reframing of them in terms of an Islamic sensibility. As such, Afghan refugees in Iran were initially nominated *mohajerin*, an Arabic term which is often translated simply as migrants, but which carries with it a whole cache of meaning and which, for Muslims, recalls the flight of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in order to escape persecution. Drawing on the etymology of the word in Islam's historical mythology, a *mohajer* is understood to have gone into exile for religious reasons where a "regime in power does not allow the free expression of Islam" (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 1988, p. 145). The one who welcomes the *mohajer* is therefore performing a valuable religious act. The Iranian government's willingness to welcome Afghans in flight from the Soviet invaders reinforced its own Islamic credentials, while speaking forcefully to the pan-Islamic vision of the Islamic Republic's early leadership.

Throughout the period of Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979–1989), Iran hosted up to three million Afghan refugees. Having shunned—and been shunned by—the international community following the revolution and the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran, and determined to strike its own path unaligned to one or the other of the two Cold War superpowers, Iran was left almost entirely to its own devices in dealing with what would universally be considered a crisis. As aid flowed into Pakistan, where hundreds of thousands of Afghans were being corralled into refugee “villages” on the Afghan–Pakistan border, Iran was confronted with the problem of managing a refugee crisis that remained almost entirely out of sight (and out of mind) of the rest of the world. The response of the Iranian government could reasonably be described as a kind active *non*-management of the situation. The free movement of Afghans within Iran came at the cost of any official recognition or support of refugees by the Iranian authorities.

Up until 1992, refugee status was granted to Afghans on a *prima facie* basis, with the vast majority of Afghans issued “blue cards” indicating their status as *mohajerin*. Those with blue cards were granted permission to remain in Iran indefinitely and had the same access as Iranian citizens to subsidised food and health care, along with free primary and secondary education. However, as it became evident that the Afghan refugee crisis would not be swiftly resolved, the hospitality offered to Afghans fleeing their homeland, gave way to a broadly-realised hostility.

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989, the painfully protracted war between Iran and Iraq (1980–1988) and the death of Khomeini on 3 June 1989, all contributed to a shift in Iranian attitudes towards Afghan sojourners. A number of scholars have noted the re-emergence, in the 1990s, of a distinctly Iranian national identity (see [Adelkhah 2016](#); [Ashraf 1993](#); [Holliday 2011](#); [Rajae 2000](#)). As the revolutionary focus turned inwards, official discourse moved from emphasising Islam to emphasising the Iranian nation. One of a number of consequences of this shifting discourse was that the welcoming of *mohajer* was no longer perceived politically expedient and Afghan refugees were officially downgraded to *panahandegan*, a term which, like *mohajerin*, can be translated as “refugees”, but carries pejorative nuances and suggests impoverishment ([Rajae 2000](#), pp. 56–58).

In 2001, the “open door” between Iran and Afghanistan was emphatically slammed shut. In March of that year the Iranian government announced that the border between the two countries was “sealed” (in [Human Rights Watch 2013](#)) This can be viewed as the culmination—and official confirmation—of a gradual shift in the way in which Afghan migrants were socially and politically situated in Iran.

Immediately following the fall of the Taliban, the Iranian government intensified efforts to repatriate Afghans remaining in the country. The existence of an official repatriation program posits the Afghan migrant as *Other* to the Iranian citizen. Indeed, Afghans in Iran are understood to be *out of place* and needing to be *put back in [their] place*. While voluntary repatriation has generally been viewed as “the foremost durable solution to forced displacement and the solution that would benefit the greatest number of refugees”, the UNHCR—known to be a leading advocate of voluntary repatriation—has acknowledged that “the Afghanistan experience has highlighted the complexity of the repatriation and reintegration process” ([UNHCR 2008](#)). The extended period that Afghans have remained outside their country and the ongoing instability within, has created a situation where (voluntary) repatriation is an unlikely (and unappealing) prospect for the greater proportion of the Afghan diaspora.

In an attempt to hasten the departure of the remaining millions of Afghans in Iran, officials have instituted a project of “encouraging voluntary repatriation” through the institution of increasingly complex (and costly) bureaucratic hurdles to obtaining and retaining residency status; the gradual withdrawal of the broad rights that had earlier been extended to Afghans; and the institution of a kind of persistent, low-level harassment. This represents a deliberate effacement of the logic of hospitality that has previously governed Iranian–Afghan relations within the Islamic Republic. Ordinary Iranians are made complicit in this policy of inhospitality by the threat of sanction against those citizens who provide services to undocumented Afghans or offer employment or accommodation.

Alessandro Monsutti has described the disorientating situation of arbitrarily shifting hospitality/hostility towards Afghan migrants as a “game of cat and mouse” in which the Iranian government attempts to balance the need for a steady supply of (cheap) Afghan labour against the impulse to “discourage integration and long-term residence” (Monsutti 2005, p. 129). In this game of cat and mouse, Afghans are isolated from broader Iranian society and kept in a state of permanent vulnerability to deportation by a number of distinct devices. A lack of official residency status in the country is foremost in a broad arsenal of policies designed to deter Afghans from entering, or remaining in, Iran.

While Iran has obligations under international law to process asylum claims, in practice there are few, if any, avenues available for Afghans to lodge such claims. A lack of official status acts to maintain Afghans in a state of social and economic vulnerability, whereby they are pushed to the very margins of Iranian society. This de facto isolation of Afghans has its de jure manifestation in the implementation of what are, effectively, Afghan-free zones: urban spaces, cities or entire provinces which Afghans are prohibited from residing in or even visiting (see Justice for Iran 2012). Hospitable spaces in Iran are increasingly reconfigured as hostile and Afghan refugees rhetorically constructed as unwanted (and unwelcome) guests.

3. Myths and Metaphors of Iranian Hospitality

The initial welcome extended to Afghan refugees fits comfortably within a broader narrative of Iranian hospitality. The idea (and *ideal*) of *mehman navazi* has deep roots in Iranian society and exists within a cultural complex of hospitality that extends significantly through time and space. The trope of Middle Eastern hospitality surfaces time and again in ethnographic and travelogue literature of the region, dating back to some of the earliest interactions between Western traveller-guests and their Iranian hosts (see Houston 2009; Matthee 2009). Andrew Shryock argues, in the case of the Balga Bedouin in modern-day Jordan, that the tendency to paint Middle Eastern hospitality as distinctive, points less to Orientalist sensibilities and a “taste for the exotic”, than to the existence of a “zone of intersecting ethical traditions” and a “shared language” of hospitality across and between cultures (Shryock 2012, p. S21). Hospitality can only *be* hospitality, where it is recognised as such by those party to it. For early Western travellers to Iran, the hospitality they witnessed and experienced (and, in turn, wrote about, weaving it into a compelling—if confirmedly Orientalist—narrative about Iranian cultural identity) is remarkable not because it was unfamiliar, but because it was eminently familiar, resonating with an ethical code that referenced an ideal of hospitality beyond law.

The moral languages underpinning Derridean and Iranian hospitality are mutually intelligible, on account of certain shared myths. When Derrida speaks of a morality beyond law he is drawing on ideas that thread through classical scholarship and the foundational texts of the Abrahamic religions. Derrida locates hospitality firmly within the nation and yet it is the very existence of the nation that prohibits the realisation of hospitality. In pressing towards an ideal of hospitality—an ideal that supplies critical power and force to hospitality as a theoretical concept—Derrida calls on a hospitality beyond (and before) the nation. This is Old Testament hospitality—the hospitality of Abraham and of Lot (Derrida 2000b, 2002). But also the hospitality of classical Greek scholarship: of Plato and Socrates (Derrida 2000b). It is a hospitality that, conceptually, crosses borders, circulating within multiple cultural spaces. Derrida emphasises the utility of Abraham, in particular, as an exemplar figure of hospitality in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Drawing on the work of Lois Massignon (who perhaps mildly overstates the significance of Abraham in Islamic thought) Derrida identifies a shared and mutually intelligible Abrahamic hospitality.

Iranians claim hospitality as a legacy of history, tracing it back to the advent of Islam and beyond, to the pre-Islamic era. However, the idea that hospitality might reasonably be considered a trait of Iranian national selfhood (“Iranians *are* hospitable” was a catchcry I became familiar with in the course of fieldwork) has a far more recent history in the rise of Iranian nationalism at the waning of the Qajar era (1796–1925). The notion that Iranians can be distinguished from their neighbours on

account of certain identifying characteristics or virtues, was only cemented as *idée reçue* during the twentieth century.

In his pre-revolutionary study, Marvin Zonis (1971, p. 210) identifies hospitality as a central feature of the “ritualistic code of interpersonal behaviour” that functioned amongst the pre-revolutionary political elite of Iran. Twenty per cent of the participants in his study volunteered hospitality as an “outstanding characteristic” of “Persians as a people” and Zonis notes that rules of hospitality function across all social classes (Zonis 1971, p. 210). Today, Iranian hospitality continues to be drawn into narratives of national selfhood, comprising less the “practical and personal expressions of respect and care for actual neighbors, strangers and enemies” (Pohl 1990, p. 75) and more an empty signifier of Iranian identity. The way in which hospitality is positioned within narratives of nationhood, exposes its inherent hostility. Ultimately, hospitality becomes part of a broader bordering regime that, in marking out Iran from not-Iran and Iranian from non-Iranian, reinforces the exclusion of Afghans from the Iranian nation.

In this section, I propose that contemporary notions of Iranian hospitality draw on two distinct metaphors. The first is the metaphor of the open door, which was made active in Khomeini’s appeal to the *ummah*—that fictive Islamic community that crosses borders and boundaries and speaks to notions of equality amongst Muslims. The second is the metaphor of the *sofreh*: the tablecloth with all of its attendant notions of consumption and conviviality. Both of these metaphors circulate within a cultural logic of *ta’arof*: the complex linguistic and behavioural code of courtesy that acts to shape Iranian social interactions.

“We did not invite Afghans here to our country”, Bahram, an Iranian man in his mid-thirties, living in the town of Marvdasht, tells me, “but we will not turn away a guest who arrives at the threshold unannounced”.⁴ Notions of Iranian hospitality emerge, in part, out of Islamic principles of welcoming the stranger. Trudy Conway (2009, p. 7) describes hospitality as “the most esteemed virtue” of Middle Eastern culture, singling out Iran as a “traditional” society in which travellers “could always count on a hospitable response”. Islamic tradition credits the Prophet Muhammad with instituting a particular narrative of hospitality as religious obligation: “Putting up a guest for one night is obligatory. If you find a guest at your door in the morning, then this (hospitality) is (like) a debt that you (the host) owe him” (Ibn Majah in Siddiqui 2015, pp. 53–54). The debt of hospitality is further multiplied when the guest is a neighbour and a fellow Muslim (Siddiqui 2015, pp. 50–54).

Afghans, in framing their demand for hospitality in Iran, appeal to a shared Islamic identity. “At first [coming to Iran] was like coming to our own country . . . to our own home. The Iranian was my brother and we were equal before God and the law”, explains Khodadad.⁵ A central tenet of the Islamic Republic, in its initial incarnation under Khomeini’s leadership, was the idea of the borderless revolution, emerging out of the imaginary of the *ummah*.

“Before Islam the lands now blessed by our True Faith suffered miserably because of ignorance and cruelty”, just weeks after returning victoriously from exile, Khomeini was speaking to seminary students in the city of Qom, arguing against the nationalist vision that dominated certain segments of the revolutionary forces, “There is nothing in that past that is worth glorification. We will break all the poison pens of those who speak of nationalism, democracy, and such things” (Saleh 2012, p. 52). Khomeini rejected nationalism as a manifestation of “Euro-American culture” (Cottam 1988, p. 29).

⁴ I met Bahram entirely by chance and conducted a series of three informal interviews—all with the active participation of an interpreter—between July and September 2014. Interviews were conducted in semi-public spaces in Bahram’s hometown of Marvdasht.

⁵ Khodadad and his wife, Fahima, were amongst my primary informants during fieldwork. I was introduced to Fahima—a fifty-year-old Afghan woman who had fled Afghanistan’s Herat Province in 1980—by an Iranian friend. Between April and October 2014 I gradually got to know the whole family, including Khodadad and two adult children. Informal interviews and conversations (some undertaken with the assistance of an interpreter, others conducted in Persian and recorded for later transcription), in the context of a broader participant-observation approach, formed the main method of data collection.

In its place he called for a recognition of an Islamic community that extended across the region and beyond. “The oppressed [*mostazafin*] of the world unite”, became a slogan that universalised the experiences of the revolution. “We must strive to export our Revolution throughout the World, and must abandon all idea of not doing so”, insisted Khomeini in a 1980 speech. “For not only does Islam refuse to recognise any difference between Muslim countries, it is the champion of all oppressed people” (Khomeini 1985, p. 286). Ultimately, the elevation of the *ummah* above the nation fomented the conditions by which the door between Iran and Afghanistan could be “propped open”, allowing entry to the “oppressed” *mohajerin* who were fleeing Afghanistan in their millions.

Importantly, the open door is a metaphor that moves within a global space (see Chappatte 2015; Koca 2015). When Iranians, like Bahram, reference the door (“we will not turn away a guest who arrives at the threshold unannounced”) it is with an awareness of the way in which it has come to symbolise a particular type of state-hospitality: a hospitality that refugees and asylum seekers lay claim to by virtue of the very act of crossing borders.

The open door as a metaphor of Iranian hospitality was activated in the Khomeini era and in the specific context of Afghan migration to Iran. When the door is invoked in narratives of hospitality it speaks to the breaching of the boundary between inside and outside, private and public. As Derrida (2000b, p. 75) describes it, “the crossing of the threshold always remains a transgressive step”.

In traditional Iranian architecture, the *darsar* (front door) is just the first in a series of staging posts or transition points between exterior and interior (Tehrani and Duffy 2015, p. 353). Hospitality does not occur merely at the crossing of the threshold but unfolds gradually, through a series of ritual greetings as the guest moves from the periphery to the centre of the home. This gradual revelation hints at a reciprocal hospitality—a noisy, spoken, negotiated hospitality against Derrida’s hospitable silence—and one which finds its apogee in the meeting of host and guest across the *sofreh*.

The *sofreh* is a key symbol of Iranian hospitality, rhetorically standing in for the food that is served on it and the conviviality of a shared meal. The very term hospitality has become synonymous with practices of providing (and consuming) food and drink. While Derrida remains focused on the “abstract, utopian, and illusory” forms of unconditional hospitality (Derrida 2000b, p. 79), he neglects the consumptive elements of hospitality (Bell 2007). In Iran practices of hospitality are intimately linked to the provision of food. Kevin O’Gorman (2007, p. 31) states that it is the sharing of food that binds host and guest and that in Iran “even today, this hospitable relationship is established through the sharing of bread and salt”.

From the moment I first entered Iran, I was both ethnographer and guest. Throughout the period of my fieldwork, I became familiar with the rhythms of hospitality: the customs and norms that shaped host and guest behaviour and the interactions that walk a fine line between spontaneous and scripted, but are never forced. In any given hospitable encounter, particular types of food would be presented and consumed in precise ways at precise intervals. Set phrases punctuated conversations at key moments: “You have troubled yourself to visit us”; “Please eat, it has no salt”; “There is no *ta’arof*”; “This is your home”. And the anticipated behaviours of those party to hospitality, while rarely made explicit, were mutually acknowledged.

This gentle art of domestic hospitality is elevated to a religious act by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, the influential eleventh century Persian theologian and philosopher. Ghazali devoted a good portion of his treatise, *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, to establishing the laws of hospitality, focusing particularly on the preparation and consumption of food (in Siddiqui 2015, pp. 86–132). There is an expansive Quranic narrative around food, in which eating is celebrated in recognition of God as provider and, implicitly, host. Hospitality has been a consistent feature of religious piety, extolled not so much for aesthetic pleasure, but rather for “feeding those in need, and cultivating relationships with friends, strangers and travellers” (Siddiqui 2015, p. 95).

Sitting together around the *sofreh* and partaking in the communal meal is an element of Iranian hospitality that is so much a part of the taken-for-granted cultural landscape in Iran, that it goes largely unremarked upon. In the context of Iran–Afghan relations in Iran what *is* remarkable is the degree

to which there is, in fact, no meeting around the *sofreh*. The metaphor of Afghan as guest remains just that: a metaphor. The hypothetical commitment to hospitality is rarely translated into concrete expressions of everyday hospitality-in-practice. When Bahram speaks of Afghans as guests it is only in the most abstract way. He knows *of* the Afghan tenants who live and work on his family's farm but he knows almost nothing about them—their history, their daily struggles and their hopes for the future. He is aware of and crosses paths with Afghans on an almost daily basis in the town where he lives, but he knows few Afghans by name, has never been in the house of an Afghan refugee as a guest and has never invited an Afghan into his own home.

The failure of Iranians and Afghans to meet around the *sofreh* speaks to a broader failure of hospitality in the Iranian space. Marjan, an Iranian woman who lives in the city of Shiraz describes the importance of the *sofreh* as an object of hospitality, "I cannot say that I know you until we sit together at the *sofreh*".⁶ Indeed it is the "breaking of bread" that temporarily transforms the host's house into a space of hospitality and a "home" for both host and guest (Ala Amjadi 2012). For Afghans in Iran hospitality, and therefore home, remains elusive. The failure of hospitality can, furthermore, be considered a failure of the reality of hospitality to adequately match the grand mythology of hospitality. The pseudonymous policy adviser Antigone (quoted in Diego Segatto, this volume), speaks about "the creation of myths and expectations that are doomed to be disappointing for most." In Iran, it is not only Afghan refugees who are disappointed by the failure of hospitality to match the rhetoric, but also Iranians who, believing earnestly in the cultural ideal of hospitality, are compelled, in their interactions with Afghans, to reproduce a flawed version of it.

The capacity of the metaphor of the *sofreh* to shift from the domestic to the national space is made clear in a 2006 article published in a Marvdasht newspaper (Marvdasht Nama). The unnamed author of the article writes about the hospitality of the people of the southern Iranian town, in terms of a *sofreh* laid out before their Afghan guests, "They [Afghans] have been sitting at the same tablecloth [*sofreh*] as us, the tablecloth which the host has been laying down before them for twenty-five years, and the host never raised his eyebrows [in complaint] that, God forbid, the guest become upset . . . Although the guest is dear, like the breath it can choke you if it comes in but doesn't go out".

The imagery evoked here is that of the host held hostage by the guest. "So it is indeed the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage—and who really always has been", writes Derrida (2000b, pp. 123, 125). Conversely, "the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of the host." In the same *Marvdasht Nama* article the author describes the same slippage between host and guest describing Afghans as guests "who have become hosts" (Marvdasht Nama).

Here, I want to reflect briefly on one particular historical incident that throws into relief the blurring of hospitality and hostage-taking in the Iranian context. The incident dates back to the early days of the Islamic Republic when the US Embassy in Tehran was seized by a group of student revolutionaries with the implicit backing of the Iranian government. While it doesn't involve Afghans or refugees it importantly foregrounds the role of *ta'arof* (the Iranian cultural codes of politeness) in the encounter between host and guest. The video, revealing a televised encounter between hostage and hostage taker, host and guest, has only resurfaced relatively recently. It isn't your typical hostage video. The slim, bespectacled US diplomat, John Limbert (in Sullivan 2009), greets the (then) Iranian president, smiling and engaging in the mild pleasantries of a host welcoming an honoured guest into his home. He urges Khamenei—a much younger looking Khamenei than the figure whose grim visage now stares out of billboards and posters in public spaces across Iran—to be seated, using the obsequious turns of phrase that such hospitable interactions demand in Iran.

⁶ Marjan played a central role in my research. Semi-formal and informal interviews were conducted from May to October 2014. Interviews were conducted in Persian and translated by the author.

This play of hospitality is almost immediately reversed, as Khamenei in turn asks after Limbert's comfort and the conditions of his accommodation. In this exchange Khamenei comes across more as an anxious boarding-house manager than what he in fact is: a mid-ranking cleric elevated by the events of the revolution to a position of considerable (and expanding) power. Limbert's response, and Khamenei's affirmation spoken directly to the camera, that the fifty-two hostages in the US embassy are being well-treated, conforms to a device of such hostage videos, whereby the categories of guest and hostage are conflated (Grebelsky-Lichtman and Cohen 2016). Limbert, however, does not stop at the point of praising the hostage takers for their hospitable treatment of their unwilling guests. Expertly drawing on Iranian modes of hospitality, he levels a veiled, but unmistakable, criticism of the Iranian government:

There is one problem, you are too inclined to *ta'arof*. For instance, it is a quality of Iranians that when a guest comes you don't want to let them go at all. You want to keep your guest and have them remain longer with you. If I say "it's enough," you say, "stay longer". I say "it's long enough," you say "it's too soon to go". When you engage in *ta'arof* too much it can upset your guest. (Limbert in Sullivan 2009)

William Beeman (1976, p. 312) describes *ta'arof* as "the active, ritualized realization of differential status in interaction". Comprised of a myriad of minute bodily and linguistic cues—small courtesies and polite flourishes—*ta'arof* underpins everyday social activity in Iran. Moreover, performance of *ta'arof* is fundamental to Iranian hospitality, providing a vital framework for the establishment and re-establishment of the respective roles of host and guest. The guest, in any given social interaction becomes hostage to the host, who, in turn, sets the terms of interaction. Acceding to the role of guest (by, for example, accepting a proffered gift or walking first through a doorway) is to "lose" in the subtle game of *ta'arof*. Ultimately, "losing" at *ta'arof* can either act to affirm relative status between individuals—becoming a vital adjunct to Iranian socialization—or, alternatively, represent a disruptive overturning of social order.

The way in which practices of *ta'arof* are misdirected or become corrupted in translation is a key motif in travelogue and biographical literature, becoming a vehicle for exploring, in an often humorous and self-deprecating manner, the (mis-)interactions of Iranians and non-Iranians in a variety of settings.

Ta'arof is implicated in the relationship between Iranian citizen-hosts and Afghan refugee-guests. "We don't want our good deeds destroyed by ugly and inhospitable behaviour towards Afghan guests", explains the editor of a regional newspaper in a 2006 article deriding the presence of Afghan migrants and refugees in the town, "Therefore, we must fold our hands and in a legal and reasonable way request that these guests—who have become hosts—leave" (Marvdasht Nama 2006). Here, the folding of the hands and the blurring of host and guest become a means of censuring Afghan refugees for a perceived breach of the unspoken rules of *ta'arof*. "Our government invited these people in to make a point to the Russians. Now the Russians are gone and we're stuck with three million Afghans", complains a young Iranian woman, "I say our generosity has been taken advantage of".⁷

Iranians argue that in taking advantage of hospitality Afghans invoke the "ugly and inhospitable behaviour" of their hosts, thereby threatening the entire edifice of Iranian hospitality. Bahram explains, "Even now after thirty years our sense of hospitality inhibits us from saying 'enough'. The good guest must know himself that the time for departure has come."

4. Open Door, Empty Sofreh

"Khomeini told us there were no borders in Islam and we believed him", Khodadad is standing in the doorway—an unlit cigarette in one hand and a glass of tea in the other. At almost sixty, Khodadad's

⁷ The quote attributed to a young Iranian woman was taken from a conversation with a group of students from Shiraz University in July 2014.

face is marked by a lifetime of small indignities interspersed with tragedy. In 1980 Khodadad joined the masses of Afghans fleeing across the western border into Iran. Expecting their first child, he and his young wife, Fahima, settled just across the border from Afghanistan in what was then the province of Khorasan.

Fahima describes those early months in the Islamic Republic, “We worked hard, picking crops through the season. At that time many [young Iranian men] were racing off to fight Saddam. There was plenty of work to be done and we [Afghans] were considered a blessing”. The couple felt themselves embraced by a rural community that, in many respects resembled the home they had left behind in Afghanistan. “[The Iranians] were not [then] looking down on us”, Khodadad explains, “If some man called out to me ‘Hey, Afghani’ it was not [spoken as if it was] a curse”.

Within months, however, tensions began to arise between the extant Iranian community and the growing population of Afghan exiles. “Maybe you can say [we] Afghans were at fault. I don’t know. There were too many rumours and too much unpleasant talk. Who can say what you should believe?”

Finding themselves shunned by their Iranian neighbours and under pressure to join the burgeoning war effort against Iraq, Fahima and Khodadad again fled.

Relocating to a large city in the south of Iran, brought a degree of anonymity. “Here we were two amongst a thousand [Afghans] and not just Afghans but Arabs [Iranian citizens, some of whom were of Arab ethnicity, who had fled those regions of the country under attack from Saddam Hussein’s army] too”.

In 1994 Khodadad and Fahima, along with their three Iranian-born children, returned to Afghanistan, under circumstances that may or may not have been voluntary. “I did not return to a country that I could recognise. Everything was destroyed. There was nothing left for us in Afghanistan”.

Crossing back over the border into Iran after eight months of precarious living in Herat, Khodadad was picked up by Iranian border guards and severely beaten, before both he and their youngest daughter Golshan, were sent back to Afghanistan. Fahima pauses when she tells this part of the story, the pain of it still raw. “Do you know that nobody ever asked me about [Golshan]? They buried her on the border and when I returned [here] it was like she had never existed”.

For Khodadad and Fahima the hospitality of the open door had given way to hostility. “Today, in [Iranian] eyes I am worse than an unbeliever. Less than a dog”, Khodadad speaks bitterly, “I know this. I am called this [a dog] every day.”

To be “less than a dog” is, quite simply, to have no inherent worth. “To Iranians I do not exist”, Amir, Khodadad’s adult son corrects himself, “If I exist, it is only as a dirty Afghan”. His sister, Nazanin concurs, “We [Afghans] are the guest who stayed too long. They say “Go home” but this is the only home I can hope for”.

Afghans living in Iran are familiar with the narrative of Iranian hospitality and indeed, have their own, overlapping, narrative of Afghan hospitality. At the same time, they have become expert at wielding this narrative in a way that highlights the multiple failures of Iranian hospitality over many decades. While official policy goes through cycles of tightening and relaxing restrictions against Afghan refugees, this has occurred against a backdrop of persistent hostility. At a day-to-day level, Afghans find themselves unwanted guests, at best.

5. Reading Derrida, Thinking Khomeini

Matei Candea (2012, p. S37) describes hospitality as a “boundary object”. That is to say, hospitality is “an object which lives in multiple social worlds and . . . has different identities in each” (Star and Griesemer 1989, p. 409). Hospitality is “plastic enough to adapt to the local needs and constraints of the several parties employing [it], yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” (Candea 2012, p. S37). Hospitality as a theoretical concept can equally alight on North African immigrants in France and Afghan refugees in Iran. Carried across multiple contexts, we begin

to recognise recurring patterns of hostility and hospitality. These patterns form substantive links between, in this case, Iranian hospitality and Derridean philosophy.

Derrida's thinking around hospitality emerged out of the fractious politics of immigration in France during the 1990s. Although he was deeply engaged with this politics, Derrida was, ultimately, less concerned with the language of rights that adhered to it, than with the "more basic idiom of the open house" (Shryock 2012, p. S22). Hospitality literature slips unselfconsciously between the homely domestic space and the nation space (see Ben Jelloun 1999; Derrida 2000a; Friese 2004). Ghassan Hage (1993, p. 79) notes that, "home, nation and family operate within the same mythic metaphorical field", in as much as they are perceived to provide virtually the same experience of comfort, familiarity and security. In this paper, I have made the same scalar shifts, between hospitality as a practice of the state—a practice wrapped up in questions of rights, citizenship and the juridical implications of migration—and hospitality as a domestic practice that occurs in the opening up of the homely space and the sharing of food.

For Derrida, the idea of the hospitable house is a contradiction: "There is no hospitable house. There is no house without doors and windows, but as soon as there are a door and windows, it means that someone has the key to them and consequently controls the conditions of hospitality . . . if there is a threshold, there is no longer hospitality" (Derrida 2000a, p. 14). If there is "no hospitable house" there is, equally, no hospitable nation. Borders, boundaries, passport controls and visa regimes all conspire to make the nation a hostile space. Yet, Iranians lay claim to hospitality as a national virtue and a characteristic of Iranian identity. In order to uphold this claim Iranians point to the "open door" policy of the early Islamic Republic.

Khomeini threw open the doors to Afghans at a moment of crisis, revealing a level of hospitality that, as Khomeini's successor, Ali Khamenei, notes, has rarely been emulated by the United States or Europe (Khamenei 2016). However, in stepping over the threshold, Afghans found themselves unwittingly complicit in the affirmation of the Iranian revolution which, for all its claims to universality, was (and remains) deeply nationalistic. The rhetorical negation of borders acted to affirm the imaginary of the Iranian nation as Muslim, revolutionary and hospitable. The narrative of Iranian hospitality—in part upheld by the presence of Afghans in the country from 1979 onwards—has hidden the very real hostility that defines and circumscribes Afghan life in Iran.

"Afghan people are our guests and they should be served" Khomeini declared in a 1982 speech to an audience of politically powerfully and socially influential Tehran merchants [*bazaari*] (Khomeini in (Tasnim 2016)). For almost forty years, the narrative of the Afghan as guest of the Iranian nation has persisted. However, in the context of prolonged exile, the hospitality that was once experienced as a generous and almost philanthropic response to a moment of crisis is transmogrified into something oppressive. As a guest, the Afghan refugee is reimagined as a burden and remains constantly indebted: a hostage, to the Iranian host. Bringing Derrida to bear on this sometimes fractious relationship between Iranian citizens and Afghan refugees, productively highlights the interface of nation and hospitality, revealing the way in which notions of national identity can be constructed as simultaneously hospitable (inclusive and welcoming of the other) and hostile (exclusive and acting to uphold the self).

For Derrida (2000b, p. 3) the question of hospitality is, at heart, "the question of the question". "Does hospitality begin", he asks "with interrogating the new arrival . . . Or else does hospitality begin with the unquestioning welcome . . . ?" In the context of the "open door" we can identify the "double effacement", that Derrida describes: "The effacement of the question *and* the name" (Derrida 2000b, p. 27).

The Iranian experience leads us to ask how Derrida's "pure hospitality", that hospitality that imposes no conditions and asks no questions, might be sustained, in practice, over decades of displacement. Having crossed the border without interrogation, Afghans now find themselves hostage to an ongoing narrative of guestness. This guestness is experienced as the violent assertion and reassertion of the host's power through myriad acts of hostility. Hostility towards Afghan refugees undoubtedly manifests itself in overt acts, but also in the quiet withdrawal of the welcome that

had once been extended and the failure to recognise and meet Afghans—not merely as components of the abstract category of guest, whose presence in the country upholds a mythology of Iranian hospitality, but as actual guests with their “inconvenient needs” and their uneven capacity to reciprocate (Pohl 1990, p. 21).

In Iran, it is the language of hospitality—communicated in the countless expressive acts of *ta'arof* and hedged in the idioms of guest and neighbour, door and *sofreh*—that circumscribes the relationship between Iranian citizens and Afghan refugees. Derrida questions whether language can ever be hospitable, suggesting that the very act of speech, of naming, is an act of hostility (Derrida 2000b, p. 27). “Language is not separable from reality . . . but shapes and is shaped by *ethos*” (Still 2010, p. 29). Reading Derrida in the Iranian space allows us to think about the various ways in which metaphors of hospitality are (or are *not*) made active in practice, in turn expanding our understanding of what hospitality *is*. A language of hospitality in Iran disguises an inherent hostility but also points to hospitality’s potential. This potential might be realised around the *sofreh*. The metaphor of the *sofreh*, I suggest, can be productively brought to bear on questions of Iranian hospitality. By expanding the vocabulary with which we theorise hospitality we can begin to explore how actual practices of hospitality might be enacted. The *sofreh* is suggestive of a reciprocal and negotiated hospitality: a hospitality that is both right and gift; and an act that must be produced and reproduced on a daily basis. The metaphor of the *sofreh* leads us, in turn, to the object of the *sofreh* and to the possibility of new practices of Iranian hospitality, informed by the conviviality of the shared meal and acting to newly shape the hospitable relationship between Iranian citizens and Afghan refugees.

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